

# DEGENDERIZING THE ITALIAN SYLLABUS: REFLECTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS ON HOW TO MAKE THE ITALIAN LANGUAGE MORE INCLUSIVE IN ITALIAN COURSES

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In today's societies people are considered "multi-layered citizens"<sup>2</sup>, and they are identified by characteristics that can be biological (e.g., skin colour, degree of able-bodiedness), related to culture (e.g., religion beliefs, language, cultural background), or linked to our life decisions (e.g., jobs). Every time each person makes a decision, the other individuals apply to them some labels which classify them in certain groups and reflect the way they see the world through their unconscious bias<sup>3</sup>. These prejudices are vastly influenced by social environment, since each society tends to organize their members in categories following different statuses, roles, level of access to economic resources and skills training, and opportunities for leadership and political power. Among these groupings «gender is only one of those mechanisms, but it is virtually universal» (Lorber, 2005: 151) and it is interesting to notice that, notwithstanding the variety and the multitude of identities, some gender linguistic systems are still attached to a binary based structure and therefore are not adequate enough to represent the world we are living in.

Teaching Italian in Canada, where attention to a gender unbiased language is at the centre of academic institutions and government policies, has made me realize the importance of using a more neutral language in class. That is why I have decided to reflect on how it could be possible to utilize a more gender equal language in an Italian course, in order to help everyone to express themselves in a manner that would be respectful and reflective of their gender identities. In this brief article I will examine how the language and the cultural aspect included in an Italian syllabus can be modified, and I will give some suggestions on activities which could be used as examples to degenderize the course's structure.

## 2. FIRST STEP: FOCUSING ON THE LANGUAGE

When we focus on the language, we want to focus on the way that gender (as an extra-linguistic reality) has been elaborated and expressed by semiotics and linguistics.

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of "multi-layered citizen" was debated by Nira Yuval-Davis (1999: 120) who in her article discusses on how the concept of citizenship is affected by the society, and it is in fact a «multi-layered construct not limited to the so-called 'nation-state».

<sup>3</sup> Over the past several decades, research and commentary on unconscious bias has increased dramatically. The concept of bias is not negative per se; thanks to our bias we constantly take our decision, what to wear, buy, eat, etc. But recently many researchers have focused their attention on how the unconscious bias reflect on the job market, career, and opportunities. We all have some unconscious bias, they are part of the human nature, but we should be conscious about them to avoid that they could influence our decision-making system. To know more about this concept cfr. Kerry, Moll, Hermsen (2000).

Although Italian descends from Latin, which had a neuter gender, it maintained just two genders: the feminine and the masculine. That characteristic can be sensed as a limitation and make our students perceive the Italian language as biased and not suitable to express themselves<sup>4</sup>. A change in the Italian course syllabi can be useful in helping our students feel welcome in our classes, and for them to perceive our programmes as a safe space, free of judgmental attitudes, and where teachers will do their best to create an inclusive environment.

Trying to degender the Italian language can bring some negative comments and reactions on how this operation could produce an action against the essence of the Italian language, but this attitude is quite common, and as Alma Sabatini (1987: 97) wrote

La lingua è una struttura dinamica che cambia in continuazione. Ciononostante la maggior parte della gente è conservatrice e mostra diffidenza – se non paura – nei confronti dei cambiamenti linguistici, che la offendono perché disturbano le sue abitudini o sembrano una violenza «contro natura». Toccare la lingua è come toccare la persona stessa.

These perceived “scaring changes”, as Sabatini wrote, are even more felt when we try to work on the rules linked to the gender. In fact, this operation can be sensed like pushing the language boundaries that happens because «[gender] is so deeply embedded in our lives because it is a social institution. It creates structure and stability» (Lorber, 2005: 13); it represents the world as we see or at least the world that we have been taught to see it. This means that language and cultural aspects are connected and they influence each other, which is why we can not restrict ourselves in just considering morphological and morpho-syntactic limits. Since it is fair to say that the usage of a language is certainly dictated by grammatical rules, but also by sociolinguistic ones. In Sabatini’s words (1987: 10) «[n]ella lingua, insomma, non sono depositati intrinseci principi di verità, ma semplicemente le nostre “opinioni”: beninteso, fondamentalmente quelle sedimentate attraverso i secoli nella comunità alla quale apparteniamo».

Furthermore, degenderizing the Italian syllabus is also an operation of social justice, as Judith Lorber (2005: 7) writes in her book saying that «[d]egendering doesn’t mean not thinking about gender; rather, it starts with the recognition that gender is a binary system of social organization that creates inequality» for a society based on equity where each human being can achieve their potential<sup>5</sup>. In other words, this means that work towards elimination of any inequality created by the reference to a specific gender in, it is an operation that could seemed challenging when applied to a language, like Italian, which has a binary gender grammar and syntax system.

<sup>4</sup> This affirmation can be proved by results of the recent survey conduct in many universities across Canada «In the final part of our survey, we wanted to analyze the perception of Italian as a biased language; for this reason, we asked all the respondents if they felt that the Italian language exhibits inequality amongst genders, to which almost 90% of them answered ‘yes’. If we break down the numbers, we notice that the problem is perceived slightly more by the female participants than the male ones (51% vs. 49%), and by the majority of the LGBTQ respondents (87.6%). The last question we decided to pose to the totality of the participants was whether they thought that the Italian language fails to allow them to express themselves, and 65% of the participants replied negatively. However, if we break down the number, we discover that 35% who responded positively represent the entirety of those who identified themselves as members of the LGBTQ community and the majority of the female partakers (70%)» (Galli, Jamali, 2020: 630).

<sup>5</sup> «Per “parità” non si intende “adeguamento” alla norma “uomo”, bensì reale possibilità di pieno sviluppo e realizzazione per tutti gli esseri umani nelle loro diversità. Molte persone sono convinte di ciò, eppure si continua a dire che “la donna deve essere pari all’uomo” e mai che “l’uomo deve essere pari alla donna” e nemmeno che “la donna e l’uomo (o l’uomo e la donna) devono essere pari”: strano concetto di parità questo in cui il parametro è sempre l’uomo» (Sabatini, 1987: 99).

The first person to face this matter was Alma Sabatini in 1986, who was appointed by the *Commissione nazionale per la parità e le pari opportunità tra uomo e donna* to conduct research on the sexism in the Italian language with the purpose of, and here I quote Elena Marinucci President of the afore mentioned commission, «rimuovere tutti i residui pregiudizi nei confronti delle donne stimolando e favorendo un cambiamento nel modo di pensare, di agire e di esprimersi» (Sabatini, 1987: 7). Despite the fact that Sabatini's work is not new, it actually just turned 35, it still is the reference quoted by various Italian linguist associations, and still presented as a testimony of the ongoing necessity to have a more equal Italian language. The booklet presents examples on how to degenderize the Italian language, suggesting expressions<sup>6</sup>, and it also gives some examples where the feminine is treated differently (in a negative way) with respect to the masculine form<sup>7</sup>. At the end of her work, the author gives some suggestions to avoid gendered forms that we can implement when writing syllabi paying attention to the language that we use and avoid, using Sabatini's words, "dissimetrici grammaticali" (100). For example, instead of writing just "studenti" we should always specify "le studentesse e gli studenti" putting the feminine form before the masculine one; paying attention in not using the masculine plural as inclusive form and instead utilizing collective nouns (e.g., instead of "gli studenti" write "il corpo studentesco"); employing impersonal passive forms (e.g., not "gli studenti dovranno inviare i saggi" but "i saggi saranno inviati")<sup>8</sup>.

Sabatini's suggestions focus on grammar constructions and a more inclusive vocabulary, but in the last decade there have been proposed some graphic signs which can be included while creating our syllabus for a more neutral language. The first one is the asterisk at the end of the words (e.g., car\* student\*) which has been already used for 10 years now<sup>9</sup>. The second, and most recent, one is the *schwa* as suggested by the Italian sociolinguistic Vera Gheno<sup>10</sup> (e.g., benvenutə a tuttə). According to the Italian sociolinguistic, the *schwa* has some advantages when compared with other gender-neutral markers<sup>11</sup>.

Ho una preferenza per lo schwa perché questo simbolo, che appartiene all'alfabeto fonetico internazionale o IPA, International Phonetic Alphabet, rappresenta la vocale media per eccellenza: quella che possiamo pronunciare

<sup>6</sup> Some recommendations are very easy to be implemented in an Italian language course, such as avoid using the masculine job titles (Sabatini, 1987: 109); employing the feminine article in front of epicene nouns (ivi.: 111); not adding the suffix *-essa* for those terms which have a regular feminine form in *-a* e.g., *avvocata* not *avvocatessa* (ivi.:113).

<sup>7</sup> It interesting to notice that many proposed instances have been taken from the Italian media, and they really highlight the different behavior regarding professional women e.g., referring to women just using their first name instead of their surname or their professional title (Sabatini, 1987:106-107).

<sup>8</sup> In my opinion, the solutions to be preferred are the usage of collective nouns and impersonal passive forms, in fact if we utilize the first one, we can only include those people who identify themselves with a masculine or a feminine gender, while we exclude no-binary ones.

<sup>9</sup> One of the first acknowledgment of the asterisk as graphic sign for a more neutral language is Carla Bazzanella's entry "Genere e lingua" in the Enciclopedia dell'Italiano «Un espediente grafico per evitare la pesantezza dello *splitting* (evidente nel caso di accordi grammaticali multipli) è l'uso, peraltro poco frequente, dell'asterisco: *car\* amic\**, *siete invitar\**... (equivalente a: *care/i amiche/ amici siete invitate/i...*)» (Bazzanella, 2010: 557).

<sup>10</sup> As she admits in her with the online journal "Lafalla", she did not start the trend but the usage of the "ə" at the end of the words is her favorite one among the various forms that people have been trying to use since it can be vocalized (<https://lafalla.cassero.it/lo-schwa-tra-fantasia-e-norma/>).

<sup>11</sup> In her article Gheno lists different strategies noticed during these years to achieve an unbiased written Italian variety from the overextension of one gender, and the use of symbols at the end of the words to substitute the ending e.g., the underscore, the asterisk, the apostrophe, the commercial at, to different combination which unify both the ending vowels.

senza deformare in alcun modo la bocca. [...] Il vantaggio è che, al contrario di altri simboli non alfabetici, ha un suono” (Gheno, 2020).

In any case the inclusion of this language in the syllabi should be explained in class in order to assist in creating a more inclusive classroom, and in starting to point out some cultural, but also lexical, differences between Italian and English. Furthermore, this could also be a good language exercise throughout the length of the course; for example, requiring the students to participate in a discussion board in which they have to reply in Italian using a language that is as neutral as possible<sup>12</sup>.

A second question that I would recommend paying attention in degendering the language of an Italian course syllabus, is about the “deadname” issue. In recent years there has been more attention paid to using correct nouns and/or pronouns in class, and some universities have been implementing protocols to make students feel safer. An example of this can be the Laurentian University, which since 2016 has been adopting a “preferred name policy”, in order to allow its students to pick a different name from their legal name which will appear on the professor’s register<sup>13</sup>. Recently the importance of this question has also been raised in the Italian language, and some academics have started discussing the question of proposing an Italian version for “preferred name”. Most of the suggestions use calques e.g., “nome corretto” or “nome preferito”, but they all appear constructions created on paper which could appear like a stretch to an Italian native speaker. Furthermore, the syntagma “nome preferito” looks like undermining the importance of it, since it could be felt like an artistic choice. On this matter, my proposal is to use the expression “nome proprio”. There are two reasons for which I think this could be a valid option. First, this is certainly not a new phrase, and it has been used before in Italian documents, therefore it should have created less cultural resistance and people have been already accustomed to utilizing it. Secondly, it contains the word “proprio” which, in my opinion, highlights the concept of ownership – it indicates the fact that whoever chose it felt the name as their own. One way that we can apply it in our syllabi could be to send out a welcome message before the beginning of our course to our students asking them to log in to the virtual classroom using their “nome proprio” (explaining the meaning of this expression). If we are teaching in a classroom, we can ask them to sign the presence sheet with it.

### 3. FOCUSING ON THE CULTURE

A second aspect on which we should focus when we decide to degenderize our syllabi is to pay attention to the cultural reading materials that we include in our syllabi. Incorporating some texts focused on the difference between the feminine and the masculine forms of the same nouns, will put emphasis on the historically-, and culturally-based- androcentrism of the Italian language. An activity that I proposed to advanced Italian classes (third-year students) is to watch Paola Cortellesi’s opening speech at 2018 David di Donatello cinema awards. Then I presented the list that she read, which was

<sup>12</sup> This exercise can be introduced as soon as the students are able to formulate basic sentences, of course the proposed subjects have to be calibrated to students’ language skills (e.g., for beginner learners it can be the description of a person, for advance ones participate to a discussion over a newspaper article).

<sup>13</sup> Regarding the Laurentian’s preferred name policy, here is the article written by CBC News reporting, which includes an interview to a student explaining the importance of adopting this rule by the Ontarian academic institution <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/sudbury/laurentian-university-adopts-preferred-name-policy-1.3610281>.

inspired by Stefano Bartezzaghi book's "*Non se ne può più*"<sup>14</sup>, and I worked on it with my students asking them to look up some of the words in Italian dictionaries. Then we reflected on them together. Some of my students were really shocked by the difference of meaning that the words assumed following their gender, others were less surprised, but it was a great way to encourage them in expressing their ideas in Italian, and for reflecting how culture can emerge through the language.

This is not the only resource which can be utilized with this purpose. There are many newspaper articles, to reflect on it and there is a lot of material, unfortunately, on the internet (some of them in English too) or shared in Facebook groups focused on fighting gender inequality e.g., *Obiettivo parità di genere*<sup>15</sup>.

Another interesting teaching resource is *Donne, grammatica e media* published by the GIULia association<sup>16</sup>. The guide examines how the Italian media treats and describes women by including several useful examples taken from newspaper articles and interviews. Furthermore, the text contains some examples of forms which can be useful in avoiding explicit reference to the gender. A good exercise, for students with an intermediate knowledge of the Italian language, for example B1 language level<sup>17</sup>, can be going through the list of suggestions and then asking the students to write some sentence/or a text using the proposed neutral expressions. This activity could be done even with students at a lower level if we give them a list of expression to utilize for it in advance.

Another usage of the booklet can be the list it contains at the end which has a catalogue of the feminine forms for professions and positions. This entry record can be used in various manners. One way can be asking students to look up feminine forms in the dictionary and find out which ones are universally accepted, and which ones are the most contentious. If the class is at a high level, we can ask the student to read some newspapers' articles and write a report, have a class discussion, or perhaps even hold an in-class debate (in Italian of course). There are currently many interesting and useful examples of the Italian academic world is focusing on the gender in the language. This activity can also be proposed in a class for beginners, once the students know the rules of the grammatical gender, we can reflect with them on some Italian feminine job title forms e.g., *attore*, *conduttore*, *relatore*..., and then we can explain to them that «[these words] do not violate any phono-morphological rules of the Italian language, as proven by their existence in some of the major Italian dictionaries. Nevertheless, in the mind of many native speakers of Italian, these words might seem still out of place» (Galli, Jamali, 2020, 615-616).

The last matter that I would like to discuss regarding the degenderizing of the Italian syllabus is about students who consider themselves as part of the LGBTQIA+ community. There have been many proposals to make the Italian language more fluid by working on words' endings, some of them work only in the written form (like the previously mentioned asterisk), other can sound much too regional for some native speakers like using the *schwa* /ə/ (Gheno, 2020). In this case, since I don't identify myself

<sup>14</sup> In his book, Bartezzaghi present a short list comparing masculine and feminine forms to emphasize how these words «mette[no] in luce come ci possano essere, in una lingua, tormentoni sistematici, che evidentemente non dipendono da singole parole ma da un assetto ideologico della lingua» (Bartezzaghi, 2010: 50).

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/432822664322113>.

<sup>16</sup> GIULia (GIornaliste Unite LIbere Autonome) was establish in 2011, by a group of Italian women professional journalists and freelancers. It has two main goals: to change the information imbalance about women, and to utilize a language without bias or stereotypes; and to fight for equal job opportunities for women without any discriminations. (<https://giulia.globalist.it/>)

<sup>17</sup> This level is referred to the ones specified by *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR)

as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, together with my colleague Mohammad Jamali we decided to take as a reference the texts of Porpora Marcasciano, and we noticed that in many of her texts she switches between genders without any differences (this is something we have been working on, and we are hoping to present the results for soon). That is why I would suggest letting our students interchange between genders when talking about themselves. Of course, some teachers could think that this method could create confusion in applying the rules of the Italian language, but we can always verify their knowledge using examples which refers to inanimate things, for example we can ask them to complete sentences like

Il tavolo (m) è (long) \_\_\_\_ > il tavolo è lungo  
La macchina (f) è (red) \_\_\_\_ > la macchina è rossa

As Italian language and culture instructors, we cannot ignore how the Italian society has been changing in the recent years, and it would be unfair towards our students to not invite them to reflect on this. Furthermore, including a more contemporary vocabulary in our syllabi would allow our student to be more connected with the Italian culture, filling up that time gap that can be perceived by some young learners in some course materials. On the cultural point of view, paying attention to our syllabi's vocabulary and materials permit us to make our courses more inclusive, and at the same time it can help creating a more welcoming classroom environment.

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